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ABSTRACT

The political environment for higher education in Australia is becoming more difficult and constrained. Although there are many sources of influence and constraint, by far the most important source is government--both federal and state. Both universities and colleges of advanced education (CAEs) now receive almost all funds from the federal government which sets the total higher education budget and requires commissions and state coordinating agencies to carve it up. Because of the way the funds are administered, institutions cannot make up budgets for more than one year at a time. Institutions no longer determine academic salaries which are instead set by the Federal Academic Salaries Tribunal. Institutions are likewise losing control over decisions about which students and how many students to accept, as these decisions are now being made at the federal and state level. Some of the constraints experienced by educational institutions result from shifts in power--particularly from state to federal levels, and, at the federal level, from the commissions to other agencies and to ministers and the Cabinet. All these constraints have resulted in a substantial erosion of autonomy for universities and some CAEs. (Author/JM)

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The Political Environment of Australian Higher Education

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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Paper given at a seminar on 21 April 1977 on 'The Environment of Higher Education: Politics, Consumers, Community' in a series on 'Sociology of Higher Education in Australia' organised by the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Queensland.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I comment on particular aspects of the current political environment in which higher education institutions operate in this society.

I will use the term higher education to include universities, colleges of advanced education and technical and further education (TAFE). In passing we should note that there are now considerable problems with regard to many of the key terms we use in discussions about this sector of Australian education - terms such as 'higher education', 'tertiary education', 'post-secondary education', 'adult education' and 'continuing education'. In our discussions we depend heavily on such terms, yet many of us use them in different ways. Further, some of our most common usages often differ significantly from common current usages in the U.K. and North America, and further still many of our usages are changing. All this leads to considerable confusion. Until recently I thought we had a fair degree of consensus in this country about the word 'tertiary' - we meant formal credit courses of two or more years duration full-time or their equivalent at a level higher than matriculation or at least for students who had achieved matriculation level or thereabouts - basically universities and CAEs. However, in the last few days the Federal Government has decided that tertiary means, or now will mean, universities, and CAEs, plus TAFE. As you probably know, a decision has been made to call the new combined commission the Tertiary Education Commission rather than the Post-Secondary Education Commission as planned. In the paper I will attempt to deal with the three branches of higher education, but I will tend to concentrate mainly on universities and CAEs.

My focus will be the political influences and constraints that operate at present on Australian higher education - that operate on programmes, on academics and administrators, on institutions, and on state and national systems. The body of the paper is organised as follows. First, I will look at the main sources of political influence operating on higher education and indicate some of the points where influence and pressure are felt. This will be followed by a brief treatment of types of influence, both official and non-official. Finally I will discuss at greater length

federal and state government influences, and then briefly comment on the institutional autonomy of universities and CAEs.

In the paper I make four basic points. First, the political environment for higher education in many respects is becoming more difficult and constrained. Second, there are many sources of influence and constraint, but by far the most important is government - federal and state. Third, within government, there are some significant shifts of power going on, particularly from state to federal levels, and at the federal level from the commissions to other agencies and to Ministers and the Cabinet. Fourth, consequently for universities and some CAEs there has been quite an erosion of autonomy.

2. SOURCES OF INFLUENCE AND CONSTRAINT

Higher education in Australia today is subject to a surprising range of different political influences and constraints. In Figure 1 I try to summarise some of the main sources of influence and constraint. I see five major categories of influence - higher education interests (i.e. interests of people in higher education institutions); the professions; community; business and labour; and government. Each of these have considerable power, although often in different ways or with regard to different policy areas. For example, students tend to have the most impact on policy items such as student financial assistance, assessment policies, library and student union facilities and course regulations. Academic staff and teacher associations on the other hand understandably tend to put the most political effort into matters such as salary determinations and aspects of working conditions. The professional associations usually are most concerned about the length and content of courses in particular professional faculties or, in the case of various 'emerging' professions, about persuading higher education to take responsibility for training for a particular profession, and then if possible in time persuading institutions to lengthen the course or upgrade it from a diploma to a degree. The business lobby is primarily concerned about the provision of trained manpower at various levels. In recent years this lobby has been particularly concerned about the apprenticeship system, and it has pressed for a Federal inquiry. To a substantial extent the current Federal inquiry on education and training is an outcome of this pressure. But overall by far the most powerful political influences and constraints

Figure 1

Sources of Influence and Constraint

1. Higher Education Interests

- students (campus associations, AUS)
- academics/teachers (campus, state, FAUSA, FSAACAE)
- scholarly associations
- associations of institutions (Conf.CAE Principals, AVCC, DOCIT, Conf.Reg.CAE Principals)

2. Professions

- professional associations
- established and emerging professions

3. Community

- churches, ideological groups
- minorities
- conservation lobby
- regional, local community
- potential consumers, parents of consumers

4. Business and Labour

- employers, firms
- business and farm lobbies
- trade unions

5. Government

- Federal
- State

on higher education come from government, both Federal and State. Later I will look at these government influences in greater detail.

3. TARGETS OF INFLUENCE

At what points in the higher education system is this influence directed? Who feels these constraints? In Figure 2 I try to answer these questions in a very simple form. The idea I want to convey is that influence operates at many points - from the level of the individual lecturer or teacher in a university or college, up through his institution and to the various agencies

and centres of power in government. I show State government and Federal government respectively as single targets. But within each level of government, political influence from outside operates on a range of different agencies and office-holders. For example, in New South Wales within the State government the current main official targets for political influence include the Higher Education Board, the Board of Teacher Education, the Department of Technical and Further Education, the Board of Adult Education, the Department of Education, the Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education, the Minister of Education, and the Premier.

Figure 2

Targets of Influence

Lecturer/teacher
Programme
Department/Head
Faculty or School/Dean, Head
Institution/Vice-Chancellor, Principal
State Government
Federal Government

4. THE EXERCISE OF INFLUENCE AND CONSTRAINTS

Influence and constraint operate in different ways. Sometimes we use the concept of influence as if influence was a simple standard commodity, pedalled around the country in a standard container. In Figure 3 I try to show something of the variety of types of influence, both from official and non-official sources. Government influence includes advice, helpful comments through to directives, determinations, and legislation. Non-official influence ranges from simply making your viewpoint known to the use of sanctions to get your way.

5. FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT INFLUENCES AND CONSTRAINTS

As I mentioned earlier, I see government as the major source of political influence and as providing some of the main constraints.

Let us look first at the State level. Constitutionally education, except in federal territories, is a State matter, and the State governments

Figure 3

The Exercise of Influence

1. Official
   - advice
   - recommendations
   - directives
   - determinations
   - legislation

2. Non-Official
   - making viewpoint known
   - advice
   - requests
   - protest
   - persuasion
   - threats
   - use of sanctions

say clearly that they want it to remain so. The universities operate under their own State acts of parliament and legally are responsible to their respective State minister for education. Some CAEs have their own acts, while the rest operate under other State legislation and like universities are responsible ultimately to a State minister. And the TAFE colleges are operated directly by State departments of education, further education, or technical and further education.

Over the past decade official machinery has mushroomed at State level for the regulation and co-ordination of higher education institutions and programmes. Figure 4 sets out the main structures now operating in each State. Every State now has at least one special co-ordinating agency, but the arrangements differ significantly from State to State. Let us look at the situation in each State in turn briefly:

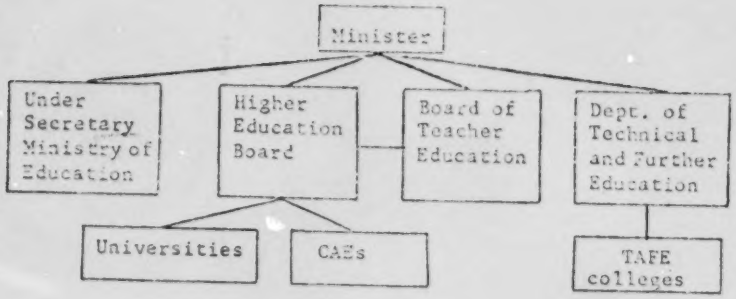
N.S.W. has a higher education board to regulate CAEs and universities, but it has no statutory agency to take an overview of the three sectors - although the Ministry of Education is supposed to exercise some co-ordinating influence for the whole of education.

Victoria has the most messy and most complicated arrangements. There are two separate CAE systems with separate co-ordinating agencies. There is also an advisory committee to advise on links between the two college systems, and an Advisory Council on Tertiary Education. But there is no agency with responsibility for co-ordination of the whole system of higher education.

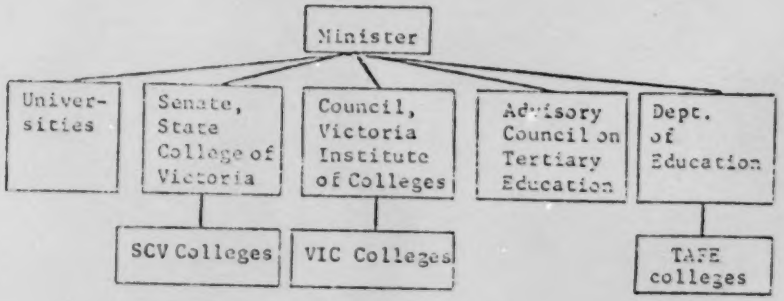
Figure 4

STATE CO-ORDINATING AGENCIES FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

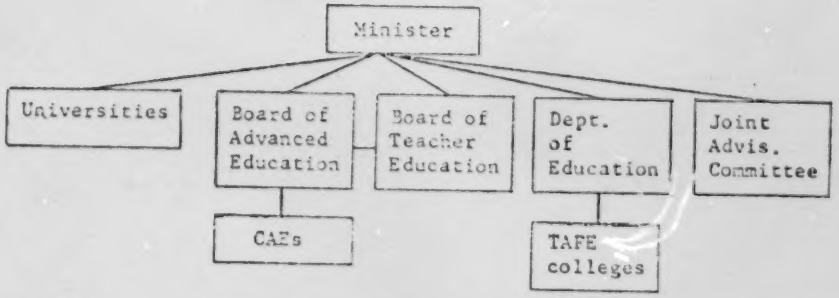
NEW SOUTH WALES



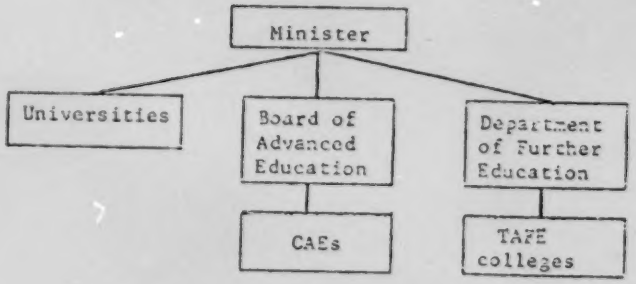
VICTORIA



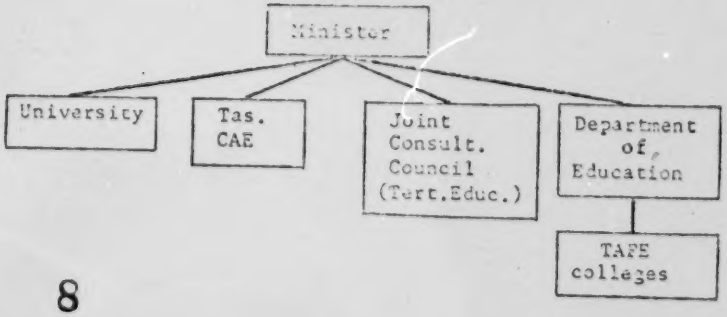
QUEENSLAND



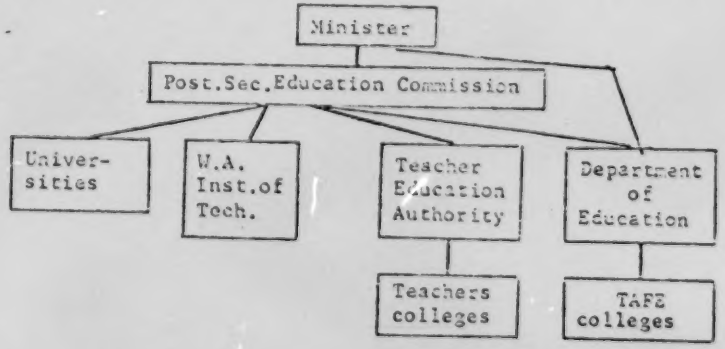
SOUTH AUSTRALIA



TASMANIA



WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Queensland has an Advanced Education Board, and very recently a non-statutory joint advisory committee has been established to advise the minister on matters relating to the whole higher education system.

South Australia simply has a statutory agency to regulate the CAEs.

Tasmania which has only one university and one CAE has a joint consultative council.

W.A. has a post-secondary commission which has just been established and which has responsibilities for the co-ordination of the three sectors.

But despite these variations, overall there has been a strengthening of co-ordinating machinery at State level, and a definite trend towards the establishment of machinery to regulate the whole higher education system - universities, CAEs and TAFE. Some of these State agencies have real teeth and regulate closely many CAE activities. A particularly good example of this is the regulation of new course development within colleges through the accreditation system. One major question for the future relates to the extent to which these State agencies will begin to exercise more control over universities.

These co-ordinating agencies and controlling agencies for TAFE, set out in Figure 4, of course, are not the only sources of State Government influence on higher education institutions and State systems. Others include:

Public Service Boards

Boards of Adult Education

Other Government Departments - in the past State Treasurers were very influential.

Ministers of Education, the Cabinet and the Premier. Victoria is a good example of Ministerial and Cabinet influence, particularly with regard to the development of Deakin University and before that the two separate college systems. Similarly in Tasmania the whole business about the 1976 report on post-secondary education and the future of the Tasmanian College of Advanced Education has been very much influenced by the State Minister for Education and the Government.

I now turn to the federal level. While State governments still constitutionally and formally control higher education, the Federal Government has become more and more involved in paying the bill and in calling the tune.

The Federal Government's involvement in higher education has developed steadily in the past two decades. Except for some ad hoc grants to universities after the second world war, until the late 1950s there was no substantial Federal Government involvement at all in higher education. On the recommendations of the Murray Committee, in 1957 the Federal Government agreed to share financial responsibility for universities with State Governments. Subsequently it set up the Universities Commission and the system of matching grants began: dollar for dollar for capital expenditure, and one Commonwealth dollar for every $1.85 spent of State funds for recurrent expenditure. In the mid 1960s the Federal Government promoted the development of CAEs, and agreed to share responsibility for them with the States on the same basis as for universities. This arrangement continued as more and more institutions were brought into the CAE sector.

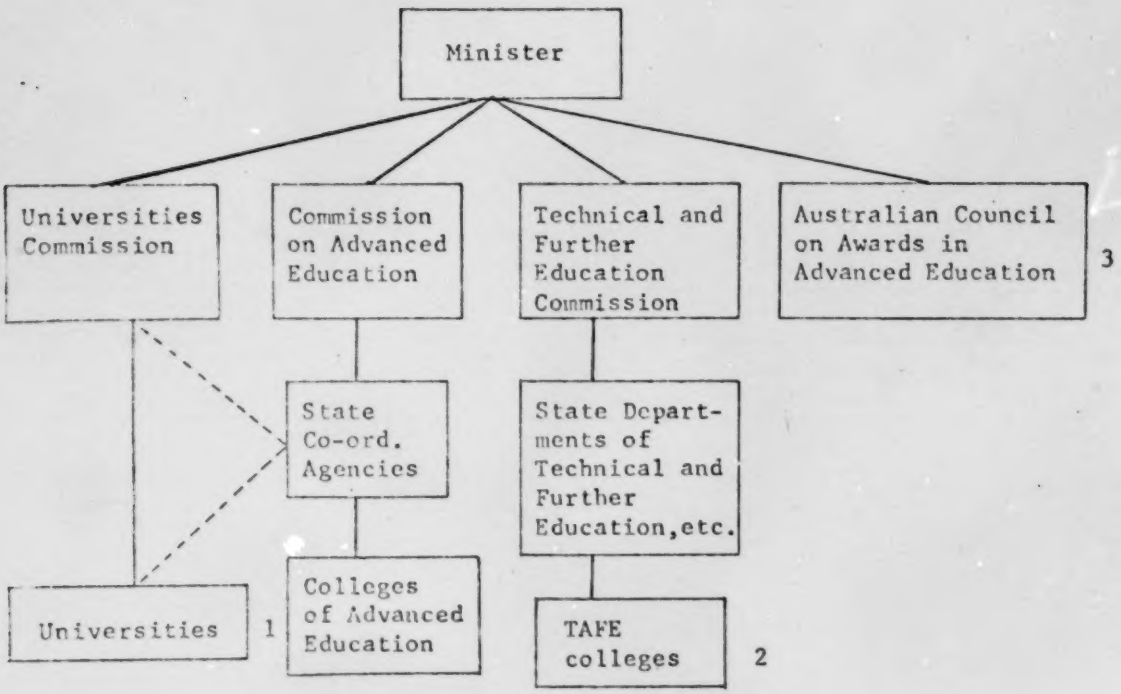
From 1 January 1974 there was a major change in the arrangements. From this date the Commonwealth Government took over full responsibility for regular government funding, both for capital and recurrent expenditure, for universities and CAEs. In return, universities and CAEs lost the right to levy tuition fees. At the time this new arrangement was negotiated, most universities and CAEs believed that there were great potential advantages in depending solely on the Commonwealth Government for regular funding. Many institutions expected that all their Christmases were to come at once! But with the Hayden budget of August 1975 and subsequent political and budgetary developments these hopes have been dashed.

The Commonwealth's financial and policy involvement in TAFE is different. It merely provides 'topping-up' funds to the States, and consequently it does not have anything near the same degree of political influence, and especially as the TAFE colleges are still operated by State government departments.

At federal level there are three main agencies with direct responsibility for controlling the governments activities in higher education. These are set out in Figure 5. As well there is a non-statutory Council on Awards in Advanced Education, responsible to both Commonwealth and State Ministers.

Figure 5

NATIONAL CO-ORDINATING AGENCIES
FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION



1. Not all States have co-ordinating agencies with responsibilities for universities.

2 In Western Australia the Post-Secondary Education Commission has some responsibility for technical and further education (TAFE).

3 The Council on Awards is responsible to Commonwealth and State Education Ministers.

But these are not the only centres of government influence at the federal level. Others include:

Department of Education
Academic Salaries Tribunal
Department of the Treasury
Department of the Prime Minister
Other Departments (e.g. Employment)
Minister for Education
Cabinet and the Prime Minister

I now wish to comment briefly on a few key current trends with regard to federal government influences on higher education institutions and State systems and centres of power, and on federal-state relations. First, among Federal Government departments and agencies with responsibilities for or interests in higher education there is some evidence of continuing friction, and this often has important consequences for higher education institutions. Perhaps most important has been the friction between the three post-school statutory commissions, mainly related to boundary disputes. But there has also been friction between these three commissions and the Department of Education, and between the Department of Education and other government departments. One consequence of friction between the commissions is that the effective power of the Department of Education has been enhanced. The Department now has a branch largely occupied with reviewing what each of the commissions recommend to the Government. Another consequence of friction between agencies is that the current enquiry on education and training administratively is attached to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Department of Employment had pressed for a number of years for such an inquiry, but the Department of Education opposed the idea. In the end the Prime Minister and Minister for Education took a decision for an inquiry, and this received the approval of Cabinet. It was agreed that the inquiry would cover both education and training and that it would be responsible to neither Education nor Employment ministers, but to the Prime Minister.

Second, there appears to be a broad general shift of effective power with regard to higher education, particularly from the three commissions to other agencies and key-office holders, especially the Department of Education, the Treasury, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Minister for Education and the Prime Minister.

This shift is partly due to current circumstances. The budget situation is tight, the Treasury is looking closely at where it can prune expenditure, and there are many sceptics in both the Cabinet and the bureaucracy who doubt claims made by higher education. Largely as a result of the current budget difficulties, the ball game has changed with regard to funding under the new rolling triennium system. The commissions no longer ask institutions in any meaningful way what they need, and they in turn tell the government what the needs of institutions are nationally. Instead the Government simply informs each commission how much it has to distribute for one year at a time (not three), and then lets it carve this amount up among institutions.

But this shift of power goes deeper than this. It is probably an almost inevitable result of the tremendous expansion of the past two decades in institutions, student numbers and public expenditure on higher education. Significantly rather similar trends appear to be operating at State level in the United States. Effective power seems to be moving from institutions to government, and within government from co-ordinating agencies to legislatures and the Governor's office.

Third, as you probably know, the bill to create the new tertiary education commission is now before parliament. According to the bill there will be a commission made up of four full-time commissioners and five other commissions (probably not from higher education), and three councils, one for each sector. It will be surprising if this new administrative arrangement does not have significant consequences for each of the three sectors, and for the whole system. Possibly one or other of the sectors will not do as well financially as in the past. However, hopefully we will now have more effective machinery to consider the overall needs of the whole higher education system, and to deal with problems of boundary disputes and the ordering of priorities.

Fourth, the present system of financing has a number of problems, and it seems almost inevitable that changes will be introduced relatively soon - or at least that the present Federal Government will attempt to negotiate changes with State governments. We have already noted that under the present arrangement universities and CAEs are solely dependent on the Federal Government for normal recurrent and capital funds. In many senses this has reduced their effective autonomy, and especially with the system

of rolling triennia. Another problem relates to the fact that TAFE is financed differently to the other two sectors. This has various implications for Commonwealth planning and resource allocation. It also has led various State governments to try to convert particular TAFE certificate courses to advanced education associate diploma courses simply to shift more financial burden on to the Federal Government. Possibly some of these courses should be upgraded, but I would argue that each proposal should be decided primarily on educational and social grounds, and not on grounds of politics. Apart from this, the present system tends to promote financial irresponsibility by State governments and also by universities and CAEs. Unfortunately there are few inbuilt incentives at State and institutional levels towards greater efficiency and better use of scarce resources.

Fifth, the Fraser Government's policy of 'new federalism' aims to push financial responsibility for many enterprises as far possible back onto State governments. Higher education obviously is one area where this may occur. If the States are forced to accept again a substantial proportion of the financial burden for universities and colleges, this could affect State policies on a range of matters including the duplication of courses and institutions, joint use of facilities, and graduate courses in CAEs.

6. AUTONOMY OF UNIVERSITIES AND CAES

My contention is that over the last decade or so there has been quite an erosion of the autonomy of universities, and also of some CAEs. Of course, with the CAEs, it is much harder to generalise as there are very sharp differences with regard to institutional autonomy between States, and in some cases even between institutions in the one State.

Now it is true that universities in this country still enjoy substantial autonomy, and overall it appears clear that they are not markedly worse off than universities in many other English-speaking societies. In fact, in a number of cases they are probably better off.

But Australian universities have never enjoyed the full measure of autonomy that some academic spokesmen claim for them, and over the past decade or so there has been a greater measure of government interference and restriction. Consider some of these restraints:

(a) Universities and CAEs are now dependent for normal recurrent funds and for practically all capital funds on one source alone - the Federal Government. No longer can they play State governments off against the Federal Government, or vice versa. No longer can they levy tuition fees. In the past tuition fees were a useful form of supplementary income. But perhaps more important, threats to increase fees were often used as a lever to secure additional government grants.

(b) No longer is the budget for higher education set after hearing from institutions collectively what their needs are. Now the total budget is set by Federal authorities, and the commissions and State co-ordinating agencies merely carve it up.

(c) Under the previous triennial system, institutions knew what grants they would receive over a three-year period, and how they scheduled spending over the triennium was largely their own business. Now effectively we have a system of annual budgets.

(d) There is no longer any effective freedom for institutions in determining academic salaries. State universities and CAEs are financed on the basis that they will pay the salaries recommended by the Federal Academic Salaries Tribunal, while salaries at the Australian National University and the Canberra College of Advanced Education, including the salaries of the Vice-Chancellor (for the ANU) and Principal (for the CCAE), are in fact determined by the Tribunal.

(e) There appears to be tighter control of Federal Government research funds, distributed by ARGC and ERDC.

(f) Institutions are losing some control over admissions. This is partly because in a number of States admissions are being handled co-operatively at State level. But perhaps more serious is the present practice of the Federal Government in informing institutions whether or not they can enrol additional students, and if so how many.

(g) The ANU is about to lose its own superannuation fund. Already all new academic staff must join the Commonwealth Government new superannuation scheme.

(h) In a number of States co-ordinating agencies have secured some powers over universities as well as CAEs, and these powers are tending to be extended, not reduced.

Thus my argument is that there is a move of effective power from higher education institutions to government, and a consequent erosion of institutional autonomy.

7. SUMMARY

In summary I have tried to make four points:

- higher education in this country now faces a more difficult political environment.
- there are many sources of political influence, but the most important by far is government.
- some significant power shifts are taking place.
- there has been an erosion of the institutional autonomy of universities and some CAEs.